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Getting to Know Andropov

Rarely a day goes by now that there is not a reference to Yuri Andropov in the President's morning intelligence report. Fragments from spies, diplomats, generals and businessmen are eagerly collected and fitted into the giant mosaic that American experts are assembling. As Ronald Reagan prepares to do psychological battle over the deployment of nuclear missiles in Europe, no task is more important than understanding the mind of this protagonist.

The files in the veiled recesses of the Kremlin bulge with material on Reagan. The Soviets know everything from the size of his biceps to the way he conducts himself at closed-door meetings. By contrast, U.S. intelligence analysts do not even know whether Andropov drinks vodka. The Soviet leader at this point is little more than a neat, dark blue suit filled with cold air. But we have made a start in putting some flesh and blood under the suit.

He has a singular stoop that forces his chin down, perhaps the result of an injury. Part of his right eyebrow is missing. His voice is middle range. He does not appear weak, nor does he appear robust. He has a gracious manner with strangers. His handclasp is firm, his hair gray. He is less bulky than the stereotyped Soviet leader, but not thin.



We are not certain of his height (5 ft. 10 in. or 11 in.) or his weight (possibly 180). We are not absolutely sure who his parents were, how much schooling he had (he apparently never completed higher education), or whether his wife is alive or dead. Nor do we know for certain whether he speaks or understands English. We do know that a son speaks English and that a daughter writes stories for a Soviet culture magazine. Andropov's affinity for the arts is hearsay because there are no confirmed reports of him at the theater or in museums.

Carter and Brezhnev kissing in Vienna in 1979

The way he walks and carries himself indicates he is not physically agile. Disappearances from public life in the past suggest some bad health, probably cardiovascular trouble. Compared with Leonid Brezhnev in his final years, Andropov seems alert and durable. But those few Americans who have seen him face to face (Vice President Bush and Secretary of State Shultz are two of only a handful) report that he seems more fragile than most men his age. Shultz noted that Andropov acted like "a man who had been in charge." Still, analysts are not yet convinced he has full control in the Kremlin.

Several stories suggest to the experts that Andropov has an ability to put people at ease, even those who might fear him. Still, there is no hint of the humanity that bubbled from Brezhnev when he was drinking vodka or hunting wild boar. Andropov has no record as a sportsman. He seems totally urban, in complete contrast to the rural flavor of Khrushchev and Brezhnev. It is assumed, but not proved, that Andropov spent his formative political years in Karelia, on the Finnish border. What he did during World War II is also sketchy. Presumably, Andropov was involved in the bitter fighting at Leningrad, but there is no public record of it.

Andropov is not a tactile person who needs to touch others, as Brezhnev occasionally did. The photograph of Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter kissing in Vienna's shadowy Hofburg Palace is a classic. Andropov is not likely to be so cuddly. Evidence suggests no pronounced indulgences (like Brezhnev's cars and guns), but instead, a lean life-style and an abhorrence of official corruption.

There is no charisma about Andropov. So far he is using television less than his two immediate predecessors. The curiosity of the Soviet people and the world will bring out more information about Andropov. But be careful, American officials warn. The real past is so dim that the official mosaic may be myth. It is no wonder that Ronald Reagan looked at the secret intelligence assessments and told his aides that he would wait to see what Andropov did before he judged the man.